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Collaborative Consumers: Meaning of Sharing, Renting, and Swapping Online

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Collaborative consumption is a system of sharing, lending, trading, renting, or swapping of goods, information, and resources that is a profitable alternative to traditional ownership-based consumption (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). With development of the Internet and mobile technology, collaborative consumption today can occur with strangers located anywhere in the world, thus enabling collaborative consumers to enjoy nearly unlimited access to a variety of goods. There are three main systems of collaborative consumption: product service systems, redistribution markets, and collaborative lifestyles (Botsman & Rogers 2010). The first system enables companies to offer goods as a service rather than selling them as products. Redistribution markets enable the re-ownership of a product in which unwanted used or pre-owned goods are transferred to a location where they are needed. Collaborative lifestyles entail the sharing of less tangible assets such as skills, spaces and time.

The importance of understanding collaborative consumption is high because of its potential to reduce waste and costs, to create global communities, to produce new business opportunities, and to be a compelling alternative to traditional forms of buying and ownership. Thus, the purpose of this study was to provide an in-depth description of the experiences of online collaborative consumers. Specifically to elucidate the meanings tied to collaborative consumption, to capture any existing barriers on the growth of collaborative consumption in the view of these consumers, and to understand how this phenomenon impacts consumers' views and behaviors in general. Within the context of sharing apparel products, we examined three systems of collaborative consumption (i.e., product service systems, redistribution markets, collaborative lifestyles) to provide multiple views to online collaborative consumption.

Methods: We used purposive sampling methods to recruit participants. Potential participants' contact information was collected from websites which represented each of the three types of collaborative consumption. Then, prospective participants were contacted via e-mail or their Facebook message boards to solicit their participation. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and website observation. Interviews took place using Skype as it enables individuals to conduct face-to-face conversations without location boundaries. All the interviews ranged in length from 40 to 60 minutes. To determine sample size, the concept of data saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was applied. The interview data were analyzed using components of phenomenological analysis (Moustakas, 1994).

Participant characteristics. A total of 30 collaborative consumers were interviewed. Eight participants engaged in product service systems, sixteen individuals were involved in redistribution markets, and six individuals were involved in collaborative lifestyles. Participants were between the ages of 19 to 44 and resided in various locations throughout the United States. Most participants (n = 27) identified themselves as Euro-Americans.

Findings: Collaborative consumption held a range of meanings for participants from the

personal (e.g., removing clutter, freedom) to the interpersonal including community building. Participants initially viewed collaborative consumption to be a method to gain value by saving and earning money but soon their perspective broadened including this form of consumption to enable becoming part of a community, helping community members, and being socially responsible. Particularly for participants in redistribution markets, collaborative consumption was not about profit but a way to contribute to society and to the environment. For some participants in collaborative lifestyles, collaborative consumption meant freedom. Collaborative consumption empowered participants and gave them the freedom to make use of skills and talents that they had not previously associated with opportunities to make money.

Participants acknowledged that collaborative consumption was not for everyone. They had experienced resistance from family members and friends when they shared their collaborative consumption experiences. Perhaps some consumers find it difficult to accept collaborative consumption because they only know and are used to traditional ownership-based consumption. Another limitation was too much reliance on word-of-mouth (e.g., online review) as a way to evaluate the trustworthiness of a person or a service. This method could be problematic because it could easily be exploited. Participants thought that some products were not good for sharing such as low quality items that were not sufficiently durable to share. Also noted was the ready availability of goods that can be easily purchased new.

Involvement in collaborative consumption impacted changes in views and behaviors. Participants noted they became sensitive to discounts and used coupons frequently. Even if an item was on sale, they had difficulty paying the sale price as they became comfortable with collaborative consumption. Especially in redistribution markets, some participants claimed that they preferred to buy used and even when they purchased new items, they used the items carefully so that they could easily swap it after use. Participants also shared that their attitude relative to the environment (i.e., concern) had changed along with their behavior. They increased or shifted to buying environmentally friendly or sustainable products. Thus, practicing collaborative consumption promoted sustainability.

Conclusion: Collaborative consumption is at a nascent stage but is growing. Many first generation collaborative consumption businesses have gone through difficult times overcoming barriers and adjusting to consumers' needs. The findings of this research can provide marketers with ideas on how to overcome barriers including balancing the business and community component of the business operation as well as adapting to consumer needs and delivering value.

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